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Design: A Participatory Action Research (PAR) case study is undertaken in microfinance NGO in Bangladesh, to evaluate the potentials of dialogic accounting and accountability systems.

Findings: The paper demonstrates how oppressive social and organisational realities could slowly be transformed through creation of dynamic, collaborative and dialogic spaces. The deep, multifaceted interactions, conversations and reflections, which include the structural barriers to and practical needs of women, exemplify the transformative potential of the PAR space created in the context of the case study.

Originality: This paper contributes to the literature on dialogic accounting theory and practice, and thereby helps advance this relatively new branch in Social and Environmental Accounting (SEA).

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Farzana Tanima and Judy Brown

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Key Words: Microfinance, Bangladesh, Dialogic Accounting, Participatory Action Research.

Article Type: Research Paper

1. Introduction

Microfinance refers essentially to a range of different financial services (such as credit, savings, insurance and pensions) provided in small or micro amounts to people who form the lower-income bracket(s) of society. The vast majority of microfinance services are provided to women, with the underlying assumption that providing women access to financial services helps empower them, (Wright, 2006). However, women's empowerment is a complex concept and, judging whether and how much 'progress' has been made is relative to explicit or implicit goals that may vary substantially according to the evaluator's socio-political perspective (Davies, 2007, p.214). Existing literature on microfinance illustrates that competing logics are common in microfinance organisations due to internal differences and sometimes inconsistent, external pressures (Dixon *et al.*, 2005; Kilby, 2006; Rahman, 1999). While microfinance institutions and some academics praise the practice and showcase successes, others doubt whether women are really being 'empowered' and point to problems with NGO accountability (Kilby, 2006, 2011; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2008). In an attempt to make sense of this diversity, Mayoux (2002) and others (for example, Battilana and Dorado, 2010) distinguish two 'competing logics' evident in microfinance theory and practice: (i) a dominant economic logic that underpins much of the literature of mainstream microfinance institutions; and (ii) an

alternative social logic found in feminist and participatory development study proposals for reform.

Gender and development studies literature on microfinance recognises that these two competing logics have considerable implications for how ‘progress’ towards women’s empowerment is measured, and how accountability relationships are conceived and operationalised. Researchers such as Rahman (1999) and Mayoux’s work on competing logics in the microfinance context, claim that mainstream understandings of empowerment are typically based on narrow underpinnings of economic logic, with a focus on simple statistical proxies (for example, repayment rates, household income levels and assets). They argue that understanding empowerment should embrace socio-political, cultural and religious concerns, and hence develop ideas surrounding social logics.

In microfinance, empowerment and NGO literatures, there is growing recognition of, and interest in, the idea of competing logics and the need for a new understanding of accountability. While there is some recognition of these matters, much accounting research still appears to take an economic framework for granted. As in traditional accounting, it focuses on shareholder primacy, wealth maximisation and technical measurements in terms of performance analysis and benchmarking (Molisa *et al.*, 2012). There is little, if any, direct discussion of the actual or potential impact of accounting and accountability systems on women’s empowerment. This study addresses this gap in a way that recognises the complexity of socio-political perspectives in this arena.

The primary aim of this study is to explore the potential of dialogic accounting and accountability systems in fostering social logic notions of women’s empowerment in the microfinance context. To do this, we draw on critical dialogic accounting theory that studies accounting in its broader social and political contexts and calls for the development of participatory accounting and accountability systems (Brown, 2009; Brown & Dillard, 2015). Drawing on the primary aim of the study and the philosophical underpinnings of dialogic accounting theory, the first author (FA) undertook a PAR case study in a microfinance NGO in Bangladesh, called Integrated Social Development Effort, ISDE. The rest of this paper is organised as follows:

Section 2 outlines the two main bodies of literature that we draw on, and the specific research gaps that we seek to address. In section 3, we position ourselves within a dialogic accounting theoretical framework – highlighting the links between that and the competing logics literature we are drawing on from gender and development studies. Section 4 provides discussion on research methodology and methods. Section 5 discusses how PAR sessions conducted helped open up a space for reflecting on social logic – dialogic accounting and accountability practices. Section 6 presents our conclusions, discusses the contributions and limitations of our study and provides suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

This study draws on two main bodies of literature: (i) gender and development studies literature on women's empowerment and microfinance; and (ii) accounting and accountability literature on microfinance, NGOs and development studies.

2.1 Microfinance and Women's Empowerment

The primary argument of microfinanciers is that formal banking institutions have failed to meet the financial demands and needs (especially those of credit) of low-income populations. Therefore, the argument is that the small-scale provision of finance makes it possible for poor people to engage in a range of different activities such as: 'farming, fishing or herding' or to 'operate small enterprises where goods are produced, recycled, repaired, or sold' (Robinson, 2001, p.9). Studies of microfinance programmes around the world have proved that poor people can achieve strong repayment records (Hulme and Mosley, 1996). Currently, there are various advocates of microfinance (such as educational institutions, non-governmental organisations, donor agencies and international financial institutions) who are involved in providing a combination of services and resources to their beneficiaries, including savings facilities, training, networking and peer support (Drolet, 2010).

One of the key goals of microfinance is to 'reach and empower women' (Microcredit Summit, 1999). However, in the literature on microfinance, there is no clear consensus on the potential of microfinance to empower women. This warrants the needs for examining competing paradigms of microfinance.

2.1.1 The financial self-sustainability paradigm

The financial self-sustainability paradigm focuses on incorporating empowerment concerns into a neoliberal agenda (Mayoux, 2002). The ideological basis of this paradigm depends on the increasing access by large numbers of poor people to financially self-sustainable microfinance services that enable them to increase their household incomes (Drolet, 2010). Ensuring high repayment rates is a key defining feature of this paradigm. The underlying reasons behind targeting women concern risk and efficiency considerations (Mayoux, 2002). Women (especially in the developing country context) are perceived as humble, compliant, shy, hence easily managed or controlled, compared to men. Therefore, targeting women is believed to increase the efficiency of programmes and to contribute towards the financial self-sustainability of the organisation, and increases women's economic activities and ultimately their involvement in the economic development of the country (Kabeer 2001; Mayoux, 2002; Lakwo, 2006). Hence, women's empowerment is understood as an expression of individual choice and the capacity for self-reliance within existing structures, rather than as a matter that requires examination of the underlying constraints (Drolet, 2010).

2.1.2 The poverty alleviation paradigm

The primary aim of the poverty alleviation paradigm is to direct funding to the poorest of the poor. This model uses peer monitoring and joint liability in a group to overcome supposedly the problems of screening, monitoring and repayment of loans (Sinha, 1998). As Drolet (2010) notes, this model helped establish the platform for credit as a mechanism for engaging people who live below the poverty line in economic activities and participatory group exercises. Women are targeted because they are seen as poorer than men, and are more likely to spend income on the welfare of their families (Mayoux, 2002). It is assumed that increasing women's

access to microfinance will increase women's decision-making power in the household and that access to income (for both production and consumption) and improvement in their status in the community will lead eventually to empowerment (ibid.). Further, it is assumed that women's interests coincide with those of the household, particularly children (ibid.). The household is thus viewed as a cooperative site, where resources are pooled and shared equally (ibid.). Critiques suggest that it is insufficient to focus solely at the household level, since intra-household inequalities mean that women do not necessarily benefit from increases in household income, even if they are the major contributors (ibid.).

2.1.3 The feminist empowerment paradigm

The feminist empowerment paradigm views gender discrimination and subordination as complex, multi-dimensional, all-pervasive processes, affecting all aspects of women's lives, which are embedded in many different and mutually reinforcing levels (Mayoux, 2002). The underlying approach is based on equity, empowerment and equality (Drolet, 2010). Women's empowerment is therefore seen as more than economic empowerment and signifies a transformation of power relations throughout society (Mayoux, 2002); the focus is on gender and class relations and other social divisions, rather than only women or men as individuals; aspirations and choices here are viewed as being constrained by structural power imbalances. It therefore stresses the importance of raising consciousness of the structural barriers that hinder empowerment in addressing empowerment related concerns (ibid.). The assumption is that if given the opportunity, women would wish to challenge gender inequity in the ways envisaged by the wider international feminist movement (ibid.). Empowerment here is therefore similar to the approach taken in critical dialogic accounting studies (for example, see Bebbington *et al.*, 2007) – that is, a process of internal change at the individual level and organisational/institutional change at the macro level (Mayoux, 2002).

2.1.4 Synopsis of Paradigms: Competing Logics

The three competing paradigms in microfinance direct attention to the different perspectives and understandings of development for women (Drolet, 2010). As Drolet (2010) notes, the financial self-sustainability and poverty alleviation paradigms operate primarily within a neoliberal framework; both view credit as the missing piece in development and promote the idea that providing women with access to credit will not only help alleviate poverty, but also increase women's empowerment (ibid.). The feminist empowerment paradigm questions the standard narrative of whether credit is the missing piece in development; arguably it offers a more comprehensive understanding of the constraints women face that emanate, for example, from their productive and reproductive roles (ibid.). The literature appears to distinguish between two broad approaches to empowerment. The first, following financial self-sustainability and poverty alleviation paradigms, reproduces a narrow perception of empowerment, and assumes that access to microfinance will serve as a catalyst for positive changes in women's socio-economic status, giving rise to the dominant economic logic (Battilana and Dorado, 2010). The second, following the feminist empowerment paradigm, acknowledges a broader approach, appreciating the linkages between intra-household dynamics, the community, market and the state; and recognises the need to address the structural (social, economic, political and legal) factors that impede women's abilities (ibid.). This gives shape to the alternative social logic (Fernandez, 2012).

As suggested Section 1, competing logics have given shape to contradictory conclusions regarding the empowerment potential of microfinancing (Kabeer, 2001; Fernando, 2006). Most positive assessments usually operate under the neoliberal framework which informs the dominant economic logic, where the household is viewed unproblematically as a cooperative site, where men, women and children share household resources equally (e.g. Rahman, 1986; World Bank, 1998; Pitt and Khandker, 1996; Holland and Wang, 2011). These studies therefore ignore inevitably the hidden power dynamics embedded in household and societal gender relations. On the contrary, drawing on the philosophical underpinnings of the alternative social logic, a few negative assessments have undertaken richer, anthropological case-study research into the relationship(s) of microfinance with women's empowerment. A much cited study is Rahman (1999), which studies the Grameen Bank's microfinance program in depth. This study specifically examines the relationship between staff-members and women clients. It illustrates how bank workers are expected to increase disbursement of loans among their members and ensure high recovery rates that will earn the profits necessary for the economic viability of the institution. The study highlights how fieldworkers often put intense pressure on women clients to recover loans, leading to new forms of dominance over women. While such negative assessment studies do not completely reject microfinance as a development aim, they recognise the considerable dangers in reducing the complexities of empowerment to the narrow economic logic models evident in mainstream economics; rather, they suggest the need to unpack the social logic underpinnings of empowerment, and to scrutinise unequal power relations across the range of actors involved in microfinance initiatives.

2.2 Competing Logics and Accountability Relationships: the NGO and Microfinance Context

Dixon *et al.* (2005), drawing broadly on alternative social logic, argue that the importance of microfinance as a targeted strategy for poverty alleviation and empowerment of marginalised voices lies in its ability to reach the grass roots with financial services, based more on 'bottom-up', as opposed to 'top-down', approaches to development that keep poor beneficiaries at the forefront of such innovation (*ibid.*, p. 406). Within the bottom-up approach, NGOs have been a favoured institutional form for delivering these services (*ibid.*). For example, the practice of 'group methodologies' in microfinance is often orchestrated in the NGO accountability literature as a crucial way of promoting bottom-up, downward accountability. Dixon *et al.* (2005) suggest that through such methodologies the poor can ensure their own gradual empowerment towards independent survival and self-management. Microfinance, as a development aim, is thus widely envisioned as a mechanism for helping overcome the limitations inherent in more orthodox development programmes by working actively and building relationships with the poor themselves and empowering them in the process (*ibid.*). Hence, the question of accountability in development organisations is a matter of the social conditions under which accountability 'relationships' are constructed (*ibid.*).

However, as Lehman (2007) argues, development organisations such as NGOs and microfinance organisations are prone to being co-opted by the very (economic logic) forces that they try to change. Further, the dilemma faced by development organisations concerns principally the nature of work they undertake, and the problems in relation to measuring performance, 'particularly if the objective is empowerment' (Edwards and Hulme, 1996, p. 968). Given the dominance of economic logic spaces, there can be an 'obsession' with measuring performance, using narrow, superficial constructs such as 'size' and 'growth', which give simplistic indicators of success (*ibid.*). In the microfinance context, constructs such as loan repayment rates and household consumption levels are often unproblematically evaluated

as measures of programme success. Such a narrow focus makes it difficult for development organisations to achieve their mission and vision of empowering the poor, and in the process it restricts alternative social logic spaces. Thus, one of the major dilemmas that development organisations face is a perceived lack of defined accountability towards its beneficiaries (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Gray *et al.*, 2006; Salamon and Anheir, 1999). This predominantly gives rise to upward accountability relationships within the organisation hierarchy (Unerman and O'Dwyer, 2012).

2.2.1 Upward Accounting and Accountability

Upward accountability norms signify the relationships between development organisations and relatively more powerful bodies, such as donors and funders. Such accountability reflects the relational structure between NGOs and their donors, whereby the flow of the relationship is upward towards the donors. The term 'upward' reflects the hierarchical mode of relationship between the NGOs and donors, and also the power imbalance between the two parties (Fowler, 1996). Here, the principal function of accountability includes NGOs providing reports to donors (such as annual reports) about how funding has been used for a particular project (Goddard and Assad, 2005). Brown (2009, p. 316) suggests that such accounting mechanisms tend to be monologic, with a strong focus on the production of financial reports and with the attainment of a 'true and fair' view. The accounts usually focus on 'outputs in terms of the objectives that the donor set when it provided the NGO with the funding' (Unerman and O'Dwyer, 2012). This form of accountability is narrow with little or no scope for reporting on other matters, making it immensely difficult to provide feedback on broader, structural issues (Ebrahim, 2003). Unerman and O'Dwyer (2006) suggest that the implicit message of fixed format, quantitative accounts is that donors are providing funding that enables an NGO to acquire the necessary resources to provide particular services, and the donors are only interested in knowing if the funding has been used for the purpose for which it was originally disbursed. In the microfinance context, this can bring a focus on short-term repayment rates, at the neglect of structural barriers that women face. For example, Dixon *et al.* (2005) found that short-term upward accountability mechanisms put much pressure on staff members of a microfinance NGO, and limited their available time to interact with beneficiaries at the field level. Such mechanisms also introduce power imbalances to an organisation, which define the relationships between actors by identifying who can call whom to account, and who owes a duty of explanation and rectification (Kilby, 2011). This suggests the importance of putting under critical scrutiny, the relevance of these procedures for the microfinance/NGO context (Lehman, 2007).

2.2.2 Downward Accounting and Accountability

In order to address the problems with short-term, technocratic, upward accountability practices, NGO accountability research suggests the development and promotion of downward accountability practices that can enhance and create alternative social logic spaces. Downward accountability describes the extent to which development organisations, such as NGOs and microfinance organisations, are accountable to those lower in the aid chain, generally to organisations which receive funds or to intended beneficiaries (Jacobs and Wilford, 2010). It is often used loosely to describe the extent to which these organisations are transparent about their actions, and listen and respond to those lower down the aid chain (*ibid.*). Downward accountability is usually associated with relationships that are against existing power relationships, where less powerful actors (such as intended beneficiaries) use accountability mechanisms to influence the actions of a more powerful actor (such as an implementing NGO)

(ibid.). These issues are important as they influence how funds are used and the actions in general of NGOs (ibid.). The primary ethos of downward accountability is that powerful actors should establish and submit themselves to downward accountability, which may involve ‘releasing some of their power’ (ibid., p. 799). Downward accountability is therefore closely associated with empowerment (Kilby, 2011; Awio *et al.*, 2010). As Kilby (2011) suggests, for downward accountability to be successful, it should involve people with limited power engaging more effectively with those who have more power. Therefore issues of accountability, participation and empowerment are closely related.

However, development organisations face two major dilemmas over their downwards accountability to beneficiaries: first, their accountability upwards to more powerful groups means that they have less time available for more informal downward accountability practices (Jacobs and Wilford, 2010); second, downward accountability mechanisms are in their infancy, and are in danger of being co-opted by dominant economic logic framing, as argued by critical development academics (Cornwall *et al.*, 2000; Cornwall and Brock, 2005; Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

2.2.2.1 A Way Forward – Dialogic Accounting

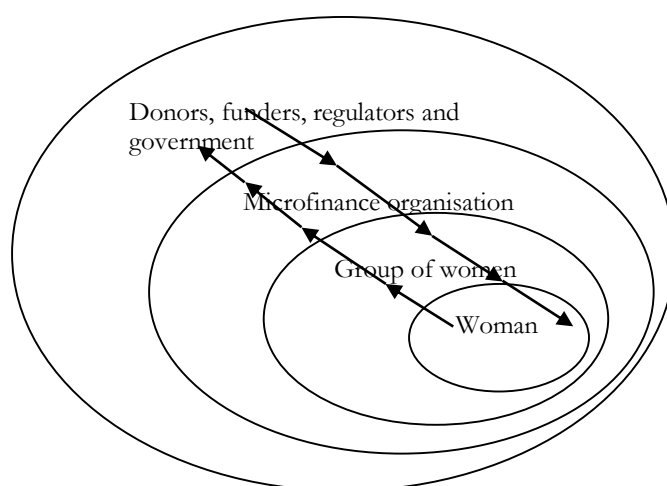


Figure 1: Example of ‘multiple’ and ‘multidirectional’ (upward and downward) accountability relationships within the microfinance context

Figure 1 illustrates the complex web of accountability relationships among various actors within the microfinance context; the upward flowing arrows indicate the hierarchical modes of accountability relationships among these actors. Women beneficiaries tend to be at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy, given their obligatory position in the hierarchy as the borrower, and their poor social stature. Also, given women’s association with loan groups, individual women beneficiaries not only have a duty of accountability to the microfinance organisation, but also to their group members. The microfinance organisations, in turn, express their accountabilities to those above them in the organisational hierarchy, such as donors, funders, regulators and government, through technocratic, upward accounts that indicate success through constructs such as repayment rates. Given their social benefit roles, such as poverty alleviation and women’s empowerment, microfinance NGOs owe a duty of accountability to their women beneficiaries (represented in Figure 1 by the downward-flowing arrows), but given the dominance of economic logic spaces within the organisational context, alternative

social logic, downward accountability norms tend to be side-lined (Rahman, 1999; Dixon *et al.*, 2005).

Furthermore, women beneficiaries in the microfinance context are not a homogenous group, as assumed in many impact studies (Mayoux, 2002). Referring to Figure 1, the category, 'group of women', is often considered in a homogenous, unreflective capacity even within NGO accountability literature that is focused on analysing accountability tensions among groups belonging to different circles in the figure. Critical development research highlights the danger of not evaluating differences between women within a group while developing downward accountability procedures. Mayoux (2002) suggests that 'women' in a microfinance group may have conflicting interests. For instance, mothers and mothers-in-law may wish to increase their income by making use of the unpaid labour of daughters and daughters-in-law (*ibid.*). It is therefore important to evaluate power hierarchies between different women within the microfinance context, while developing downward accountability procedures. As Cornwall (1997) suggests, the identities occupied by women and men are not 'fixed', but 'multiple and shifting' (p. 10). It is therefore important to pay attention to how 'women' as a category *intersects* with other identities and social categories, such as class, religion, ethnicity (Valentine, 2007). Hence, downward accountability within the microfinance context should recognise the multiple forms of discrimination that women face (Mayoux, 2002).

This highlights the need for more work on the concept of accountability in the microfinance context, specifically in relation to multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination that women face. As discussed in Section 1, proposals for dialogic forms of accounting resonate strongly with ideas about participatory systems of development. Thus, there is much potential for dialogic accounting to learn from gender and development studies (for example, in terms of developing ideas about participatory development, engaging with disempowered groups, and understanding the multifaceted nature of structural barriers on women), and also for gender and development studies to learn much from dialogic accounting (for example, in terms of critiquing dominant economic logic and operationalising ideas about social accountability).

3. Theoretical Framework: Dialogic Accounting

The theoretical framing for our study is dialogic theory and critical pluralism, as applied by researchers in the field of dialogic accounting (e.g. Thomson and Bebbington, 2005; Bebbington *et al.*, 2007; Frame and Brown, 2008; Brown, 2009 Söderbaum and Brown, 2010; Dillard and Roslender, 2011; Molisa *et al.*, 2012). In this section, we discuss those aspects of dialogic theory (as it has been applied in accounting to date) which are relevant to our study, and explain how we anticipate our own study contributing to its further development. To date, dialogic theory has been applied to accounting in three main ways:

- (i) As an analytic approach by which to document and explore competing socio-political perspectives. In common with applications of Bakhtinian dialogic theory in other disciplines, the emphasis here is on exploring competing perspectives in a particular social arena and their implications for accounting/accountability systems. There are a few studies which have taken this approach to date: Brown (2000) exploring competing ideologies in the accounting and labour relations environment; Brown and Fraser (2006) exploring competing conceptualisations of SEA; Brown (2009) and Söderbaum and Brown (2010) distinguishing between monologic and dialogic approaches to accounting and economics; Brown and Dillard (2014) exploring the 'death of environmentalism' debates and their implications for SEA. In this study, we articulate

competing logics in relation to women's empowerment and microfinance, and explore their implications for accounting and accountability systems.

- (ii) As a way of theorising research engagement in SEA (Bebbington *et al.*, 2007). Drawing on Freirian concepts of participatory learning, Bebbington *et al.*, 2007 call for critical dialogic engagement based on a philosophy of advancing knowledge, relevant to academia and the wider community, by iterating theory with practice. A critical dialogic approach is based on the idea of researchers and research participants working together as co-investigators – to promote two-way learning. It emphasises the potential of developing both theoretical concepts and practice by working with the potential beneficiaries of new dialogic approaches. This is a process-oriented approach which is similar to participatory forms of action research that promote the idea of researchers and research subjects working together, rather than the researcher trying to implement a 'blueprint' worked out in advance. As such, it emphasises that the *processes* of change are important, not merely the specified, desired endpoint. This approach resonates strongly with the gender and development studies literature, where there is a well-established theoretical and practical literature on participatory action research in a developing country context (Kindon *et al.*, 2007). Use of this literature allows us to expand on the work of Bebbington *et al.* (2007). One example of how we do this is to draw on Tolley and Bentley's (1996) adaption of the 'four squares of knowledge' to allow more refined discussion of the different ways that action research methods and methodology can be approached.
- (iii) As a proposed new approach to accounting technologies, stakeholder engagement and governance practices (for example, Bebbington *et al.*, 2007; Frame and Brown 2008; Brown, 2009; Molisa *et al.*, 2012 discussing the application of dialogic theory in a developing country context). Here the aim is to highlight the (often implicit) assumptions in particular accounting practices, to enable currently marginalised groups to develop accountings that are consistent with their own values and assumptions, to enable two-way learning between report preparers and users, and to promote discussion and dialogue. This is a continuation of the previous step where the crucial aim is to foster a space for critical dialogic engagement between parties with different power dynamics, exposing and uncovering the hidden contradictions presented by dominant structures. One aspect of this exercise involves highlighting how accounting as a concept is inextricably intertwined with societal reality that gives shape to technocratic structures and hinders other perspectives that have the potential to empower marginalised groups. For example, in the context of microfinance NGOs, accounting practices are geared towards producing numbers for the benefit of donors. Donors are crucially interested to know how much of their funding has been spent, and on what, rather than focusing on the effectiveness of the provision of such funding (Unerman and O'Dwyer, 2012). Staff members of microfinance NGOs therefore focus on producing technocratic, narrow accounting reports, rather than engaging effectively with marginalised groups (Dixon *et al.*, 2005). The FA's role as a researcher, here, involves highlighting the problematic nature of such narrow accounting practices to research participants and the need to create dialogic accounting practices that have the potential to take account of structural barriers that participants face. This process therefore involves not only understanding and exposing the barriers participants face, but also co-developing accounting practices that take the concept of accountability seriously.

4. Methodology and Methods

The general methodological approach of this study is based on a philosophy of critical dialogic engagement, as outlined in Bebbington *et al.* (2007). While, Bebbington *et al.* (2007) is useful at the general philosophical level, the research methods used to operationalise this approach in a particular empirical setting require further elaboration. Brown and Dillard (2014, p. 16), for example, call for more ‘critical’ action research, and note that the small amount of action research undertaken in accounting to date has primarily involved working with business and/or policy-makers addressing issues of ‘managerial significance’. They highlight the need to foster more participatory forms of action research that could empower marginalised voices. Therefore, we decided to undertake a PAR case study. PAR has been used extensively in the gender and development studies literatures, and provides a fitting way to explore the possibilities of dialogic accounting in a developing country context.

4.1 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Central to the conception of PAR is the post-structural perspective that seeks the deconstruction of taken-for-granted assumptions, strategies and habits (Reason and Bradbury, 2006; Kindon *et al.*, 2007; Gaventa and Cornwall, 2006; Tilakratna, 1991). In order to encourage change through critical awareness building, PAR advocates regard it as essential to break up the ‘classical dichotomy between subject and object’ (Tilakratna, 1991, p. 136). PAR focuses on providing a space for ‘humanistic modes’ of interaction and participation (*ibid.*). Participation as a concept in PAR is therefore promoted as being inextricably linked with the constructs of power and knowledge. In line with dialogic accounting, PAR advocates therefore strive to embody democratic commitment towards breaking the monopoly on who holds knowledge by explicitly collaborating with marginalised and vulnerable others (Kindon *et al.*, 2007).

Table 1: The Four Squares of Knowledge

<u>I</u> <u>We know</u> <u>They know</u>	<u>II</u> <u>We don’t know</u> <u>They know</u>
<u>III</u> <u>We know</u> <u>They don’t know</u>	<u>IV</u> <u>We don’t know</u> <u>They don’t know</u>

Source: Herr and Anderson (2005) [originally adapted from Tolley and Bentley, 1996]

Herr and Anderson (2005) highlight that when outsiders enter a collaborative research study with the mind-set of quadrant III of Table 1, they frame themselves as outside experts, rather than as collaborative researchers. This often reinforces a tendency by insiders to place themselves in quadrant II, undervaluing their own knowledge. The goal of PAR is to reduce the tendencies of quadrant II and III and to expand quadrant I. The underlying ethos of PAR is to embrace ‘knowledge production as a contested, fraught process’ (Kindon *et al.*, 2007, p. 229). Consequently, it assumes there is no one singular or universal truth (which quadrant I, applied alone, may appear to represent). Instead it emphasises the power of intersectional analysis that takes difference into account (*ibid.*). Thus, the outcome of the engagement between traditionally considered researcher and research participants does not focus on a

search for one right answer, but rather on a commitment to a process whereby the parties involved can expect to learn something of the worldview of the other in a multifaceted, messy process (Bebbington *et al.*, 2007). Dialogic thinking ‘accepts this messiness and works with it as an essential way of engaging with a lived reality’ and hence promotes the importance of awareness-raising participatory exercises between and among researcher(s) and research participants (Bebbington *et al.*, 2007, p. 365). Consequently, PAR maintains a commitment to praxis, the idea of theory and practice enmeshed together (Rahman, 1993; Kindon *et al.*, 2007; Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2007). This requires the researcher to make continuous shifts and negotiations in her/his position and a commitment to address power imbalances during the entire research process (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2007). This commitment demands continuous dialogue, interaction and most importantly ‘critical self-reflection’ (*ibid.*, p. 144). Kindon *et al.* (2007) argue that the process of PAR is cyclical. It begins with researchers and participants identifying a situation in need of change; they then plan the research process to facilitate the relevant ‘action’. Action in this context inclines more towards learning, which plants the seeds of introducing change over time on the basis of conscientisation and awareness-raising (Rahman, 1993). The next phase in the research process is reflection. Both researchers and participants reflect on and learn from their ongoing interactions and dialogues and proceed to a new cycle of research, which involves both action and further reflection (Kindon *et al.*, 2007). The underlying emphasis of PAR is on dialogic engagement with co-researchers and the development of context-specific strategies oriented towards various degrees of empowerment and transformation (*ibid.*). Key to facilitation of dialogic engagement is to keep the spirits of ongoing collaboration active during the research process. Kindon *et al.* (2007, p. 51) cite Pretty *et al.* (1995) who propose the participation continuum shown in Figure 2.

Phase	Activities
Action	Establish relationships and common agenda between all stakeholders Collaboratively scope issues and information Agree on time-frame
Reflection	On research design, ethics, power relations, knowledge construction process, representation and accountability
Action	Build relationships Identify roles, responsibilities and ethics procedures Establish a Memorandum of Understanding Collaboratively design research process and tools Discuss and identify desired action outcomes
Reflection	On research questions, design, working relationships and information requirements
Action	Work together to implement research process and undertake data collection Enable participation of others Collaboratively analyse information generated Begin planning action together
Reflection	On research process Evaluate participation and representation of others Assess need for further research and/or various action options
Action	Plan research-informed action which may include feedback to participants and influential other
Reflection	Evaluate action and process as a whole

Figure 2: Action-reflection Cycle

As highlighted in the figure, the PAR process calls for a reflective engagement between the researcher and research participants in order to keep the democratic ethos of PAR alive. As can be inferred, PAR researchers must have some important qualities, such as being active listeners, sociable, and able to work collaboratively (Kendon *et al.*, 2007).

4.1.1 Implementing Critical Dialogic Engagement: Fieldwork Design

The FA conducted a (PAR) case study of a microfinance NGO in Bangladesh called, Integrated Social Development Effort (ISDE). The fieldwork was conducted in two separate phasesⁱⁱ. This allowed the FA ample opportunity to reflect on the data collected from the first phase and, accordingly, to design the data collection mechanism for the second phase. The first phase was conducted between December 2011 to March 2012. For the first phase of the fieldwork, the FA focused on familiarising herself with the case site and becoming acquainted with various organisational actors. For this phase the FA collected data through methods such as participant observation, reading documents, and conducting one-on-one and group interviews with ISDE actors. For the second phase, the FA conducted several PAR sessions with research participants. This phase was conducted between December 2012 to March 2013. Both phases were informed by and were part of the broader aforementioned PAR methodology that focused around the dialogic transformation of ideals as a mechanism for creating change.

Phase 1 – Background preparation for the PAR.

This phase involved an in-depth literature review, documenting different perspectives on ‘microfinance and women’s empowerment’ in the specific context of microfinance initiatives in Bangladesh. This included study of both: (i) the gender and development studies literature; and (ii) the accounting and accountability literature, exploring different understandings of the term ‘women’s empowerment’ and different approaches to evaluating the success of microfinance initiatives.

The main questions that guided the reading of the literature are as follows:

- How do competing logics manifest themselves in terms of different perceptions and beliefs about the meaning of women’s empowerment? What are the overlaps and tensions between the economic/commercial and social logic frames? How do interpretations of women’s empowerment vary across the various social actors involved in microfinance initiatives?
- How, if at all, are different logics implicated in accounting and accountability systems for microfinance institutions? What explicit or implicit framings of women’s empowerment are evident in the accounting/accountability literatures on microfinance and in the practices of microfinance institutions? How, if at all, is the goal of women’s empowerment recognised in internal and external reporting systems?

Phase 2 – Case study: ISDE, Bangladesh.

Where Phase 1 focused on documenting different perspectives, this phase involved exploring how, if at all, these different perspectives play out in ISDE. This included an in-depth exploration of the microfinance accounting and accountability practices of ISDE, considering both its current practices and working with organisational members and their stakeholders to see what value, if any, they can see in the potential of dialogic accounting systems to promote women's empowerment.

ISDE is a microfinance NGO (established in 1992) with branches distributed across south-eastern Bangladesh. As stated in its information profile, ISDE's critical aim is to create self-sustaining rural communities through the process of implementing a number of social and economic activities. Its core mission is to facilitate socio-economic change in the lives of disadvantaged people, particularly women and children, through the promotion of income and employment generating activities, health services, education, peace building, and awareness-raising. According to ISDE's information profile, its crucial focus is on women's empowerment and addressing gender specific discrimination. Table 2 below (taken from ISDE's Brief Information Profile) highlights how ISDE analyses empowerment at social, economic and political levels. In line with the critical principles of dialogic accounting and gender and development studies, ISDE highlights the need for addressing empowerment as a complex, multi-perspectival issue. As can be seen in the table, ISDE does not reduce empowerment to the narrow confines of the 'economic' as many mainstream organisations do.

Table 2: Empowerment: Competing Logics

PRIORITY EMPOWERMENT AREAS THROUGH PROGRAMMATIC INTERVENTIONS:

Social Empowerment	Economic Empowerment	Political Empowerment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Social mobilization and Institution development• Development Education & awareness• Awareness raising on civic and basic legal rights• Making education system gender sensitive• Disaster Risk Reduction and Environment Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Capacity and skills development• Livelihoods improvement and assets building of women• Market extension for women and vulnerable segments of the society• Gender budget analysis• PRSP & MDG analysis• Increase access to public resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strengthening local government mechanism and governance• Citizen friendly Electoral reform• Increased participations of women in socio and political institutions

Also, the core philosophy of ISDE is to involve their clients in the 'development of basic facilities and encourage and monitor them'.ⁱⁱⁱ As stated in the information profile, a typical weekly client meeting at the ISDE involves participants discussing their problems and sharing information with each other regarding their needs, tasks, rights and possible solutions. The information profile states that these meetings act as a forum for social education, emphasising utilisation of local wisdom and resources, and encouraging innovation and creativity. We were thus interested to gain access to ISDE, as it has a strong focus on the objective of women's empowerment, seeks to develop its participatory practices, and expressed explicit interest in learning more about how dialogic accounting might help it to embed a social logic.

The microfinance loan centres of ISDE are located in two different locations in south-eastern Bangladesh – Chittagong and Maheshkhali. While Chittagong is the most economically developed city in Bangladesh after the capital city Dhaka, Maheshkhali is a village in the Cox's Bazar District in the division of Chittagong. For the first phase of the field work, the FA focused on familiarising herself with both the Chittagong and Maheshkhali loan sites; for this phase

fifty semi structured interviews were conducted with research participants (such as, the executive director, board members, managers, fieldworkers, women beneficiaries and their families); some interviews were group interviews, designed to contribute to the learning aspects of dialogic methodology. For the second phase of the fieldwork, the FA conducted twelve PAR sessions with Maheshkhali women beneficiaries and staff members of ISDE, including loan officers, managers, and the executive director. The FA chose to conduct the PAR sessions in Maheshkhali, given, that participants in this site were able to commit to participating in the PAR sessions.

4.1.2 Application of PAR

Examples of the questions which the FA explored through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions, and various other methods^{iv} include:

- How have microfinance initiatives empowered women in this community? What do the different social actors in this community understand the term empowerment to mean? How does this affect their understandings of whether microfinance schemes have been successful? What tensions, if any, do they see between economic/commercial logics and social logics?
- What accounting and accountability systems operate in this particular case environment? What, if any, connections exist between these systems and the competing logics in Mayoux's typology? How, if at all, is women's empowerment embedded in ISDE's accounting and accountability systems? What reporting, if any, do they provide on their various empowerment goals? How, if at all, might ideas about dialogic accounting help ISDE achieve its goals in relation to women's empowerment? How might it help to operationalise ideas about participatory development? What opportunities and challenges do the research participants see in the development and operationalisation of dialogic accounting and accountability systems?

In order to keep the democratic ethos of PAR alive, the FA continuously reflected on the basis of the facilitation of the research process. The PAR phase consisted of five overlapping phases: diagnosing, planning, implementing, evaluating and learning. The process of self-reflection was maintained throughout these phases.

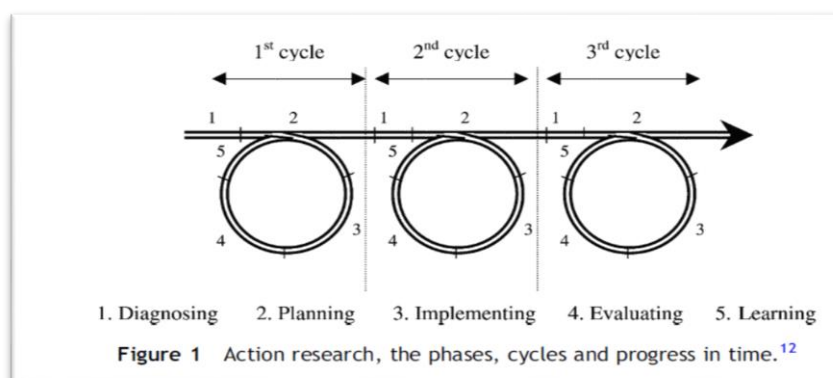


Figure 4: PAR Process (sourced from Heale, 2003, p.8)

4.1.3 PAR Methods

Following the ethos of dialogic pluralism, the FA kept the PAR sessions as open-ended and fluid as possible. The underlying aim was to build collaborative relationships with the PAR participants and to create an atmosphere where participants felt encouraged to open up about structural barriers they face and to discuss various social issues. In order to facilitate this, the FA actively maintained a patient, sociable and flexible manner. She developed interactive PAR sessions by fostering an environment that encourages participation, critical learning, and reflection. She therefore adopted ‘group discussions’ as the predominant methodological tool for all the PAR sessions.

Through these sessions the FA aimed to gain insight and understanding into the Maheshkhali context, build close and personal relationships with the PAR participants, raise feministic awareness around various social issues, and engage in collaborative dialogues with the PAR participants. As a facilitator she had to depend heavily on her own intuition to determine how best to make these sessions interactive. She focused on methods that she thought could help her connect and engage in a meaningful manner with participants. The FA used dynamic and visual methods, such as telling stories, writing life-stories with participants, reflecting on memories, picture description exercises, showing videos and taking informal walks across the village with participants. She only used methods that participants were comfortable with, paying close attention to group dynamics between the participants, how participants interacted with each other, how participants reacted (for example, happy, sad, angry or excited) to the different methods and what kinds of discussions the different methods gave rise to. Each session was a learning experience for the FA. She maintained a reflective journal to keep note of all her observations, analyses and reflections. The FA designed each session, based on her reflections, past experiences from other sessions, and opinions of participants on the methods. She also paid careful attention to the topics she chose for discussion, selecting topics which participants could relate to the most. This in itself was a learning experience; for example, during the first phase of the fieldwork, many women in Maheshkhali spoke about problems they faced in relation to dowry. Whenever the FA raised ‘women’s rights’ as a topic, the issue of dowry was highlighted as one of the biggest problems that women face in the Maheshkhali context. The FA therefore made dowry the focus for group discussions in one of the sessions. Discussions on structural barriers that women face were a very effective way of connecting with the women. This also enabled the FA to gain much deeper insights into the lives of women than would have been possible from interviews. Other topics discussed were: ‘socially constructed roles of women in the Maheshkhali context’, ‘social differences between men and women’, ‘microfinance practices’, ‘social differences between upper and lower class women’, ‘social differences between women in the Western and Maheshkhali context’, ‘happy and sad memories’, ‘dreams and aspirations’, ‘differences between female work and male work’, ‘women’s empowerment’ and ‘dialogic accounting and accountability systems’. The FA also invited suggestions from the women participants and staff members regarding how she should structure sessions and topics to include. This ensured an ongoing, collaborative relationship with the research participants and helped maintain the dialogic ethos during the overall research process. Figure 5 below highlights the methods that were used in the PAR sessions.

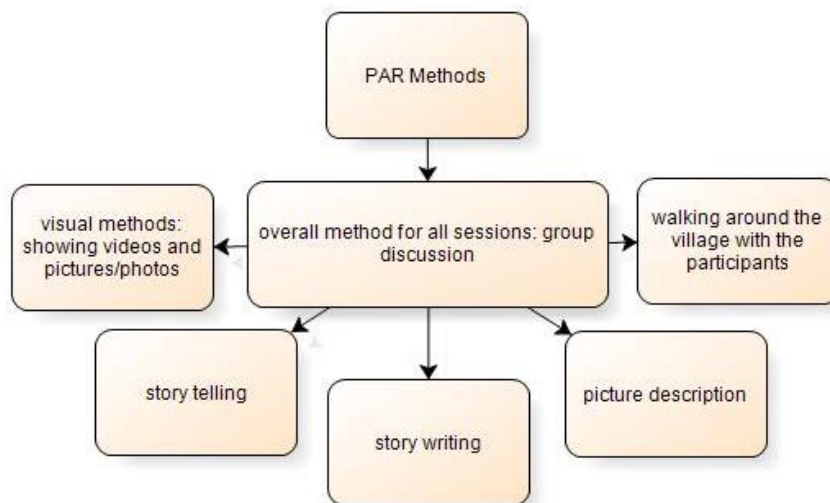


Figure 5: PAR Methods

5. Accounting and Accountability Practices in ISDE

This section addresses the research objective of this study by firstly exploring how dominant economic logic shape accounting and accountability practices and relationships within ISDE, and secondly discussing how PAR sessions conducted helped open up a space for reflecting on social logic – dialogic accounting and accountability practices and hence challenge dominant economic logic spaces.

5.1 Accounting and Accountability Practices- Dominant Economic Logic

The microfinance operation in ISDE consists of several practices such as client selection, group meetings and loan collection, client information-keeping, general accounts handling, and preparing reports. These accounting practices, which include the short-term goal of repayment rates, shape accountability relationships among senior officers, managers, fieldworkers and beneficiaries. In this section, we discuss two practices – beneficiary selection and loan collection, to illustrate how it predominantly gives rise to upward accountability relationship within ISDE.

5.1.1 Beneficiary Selection

Beneficiary selection process is one of the most crucial phases of the ISDE microfinance programme. As the executive director mentioned: ‘careful selection of responsible beneficiaries helps ensure the overall sustainability of the microfinance programme’. Thus, contrary to the policy documents, which allude to the selection of beneficiaries from what are regarded as socially ‘vulnerable groups’ with limited or no income sources, the FA’s field-based observations and interviews with ISDE members suggest this is not necessarily the case. As the Maheshkhali branch manager mentions:

When forming a new group, you have to do so in such a way that all members of the group are from the same religion, similar age group...same extended family, if possible,...and of similar economic stature....The first thing you would have to do is identify the areas that you want to target...The first thing you have to determine is if you give them loan money, would they be able to repay it? You also have to make a small comparative study between areas...you have to study the kind of businesses each area has...You have to study their monetary dealings....and know their income levels ... You also have to consider their individual family structures.

As can be understood from the above reference, the beneficiary selection process involves careful study of various factors. Consideration is given to whether homogenous groups could be formed within a particular locality (to enforce norms of group liability). After analysing individual areas, individual families are studied in terms of their familial income and structure before loans are given out. The manager further stated that they try to 'convince' potential beneficiaries to join the microfinance programme. This suggests how the selection process involves methodical judgements in terms of identifying 'good' beneficiaries who can repay their loan money. Once potential beneficiaries are selected, managers will arrange for several initial meetings with beneficiaries, 'briefing them on what is expected'. This demonstrates how from the inception of the group, beneficiaries have the values instilled of what a 'good' client is considered to be, which ultimately give rise to accountability relationships that flow upwards from beneficiaries to the organisation.

While the managers are more active in the beneficiary selection phase, receiving administrative input from fieldworkers when necessary, fieldworkers usually have responsibility for the next phase, which involves actively observing beneficiary groups during the initial phases of group formation. Once the groups are formed, beneficiaries cannot take out loans immediately. In ISDE, beneficiaries are required to save from between 10 to 50 taka^v every week, for approximately a year, before ISDE will grant loans^{vi}. During this phase, fieldworkers keep track of the beneficiaries' saving habits, and how they^{vii} fare in their individual businesses. As the fieldworkers in the Chittagong and Maheshkhali branches describe:

You cannot disburse loans at the first meeting...first, you have to work with them at least for a month....see how they work, understand the group dynamics, and set the strategies accordingly...Granting loans right at the beginning without a proper understanding of the group structure would not be the right thing to do. Otherwise, people may flee with the money. And we have to be answerable for such things! – Fieldworker, Chittagong branch

Newly selected beneficiaries are kept under surveillance for approximately a year; attention is also given to the group dynamics (interactions and relationships among group members) and the individual economic situations of beneficiaries before any loans are granted. As the fieldworkers stressed, if they did not attend to such factors, they could eventually face direct repercussions. Thus, fieldworkers are nervously preoccupied with a strong sense of responsibility for ensuring repayments. This gives rise to upward accountability relationships^{viii} between fieldworkers and senior officers in which fieldworkers are constantly anxious about whether they can successfully collect repayments.

The above discussion highlights how both managers and fieldworkers strive to fulfil their own notions of accountability by ensuring the selection of good, responsible beneficiaries. This nervous preoccupation with selecting good beneficiaries, driven by the short-term motive of maintaining repayment rates can also be observed in the behavioural patterns of beneficiaries, who are also actively involved in the selection process. The appointed group leader, selected from among the beneficiaries, acts as an insider, without whose approval no loan can be given; other beneficiaries in the group also become active agents in helping fieldworkers and group

leaders decide whether a prospective new beneficiary is worthy of selection. As a beneficiary in a focus group discussion describe:

Shahab^{ix} (referring to the manager) won't understand who is good and who is bad! We have such information. We live here. We know. So we do the screening and selection. We shoo away the bad ones.

The above quotes reflect how beneficiaries themselves embrace the notion of upholding the image of being good, responsible beneficiaries; this motivates them to endeavour actively to exclude members deemed 'imperfect', giving rise to hidden conflicts and barriers in a neighbourhood. As the beneficiary stated, they try to 'shoo away the bad ones'. Such behaviour highlights how an 'air of arrogance' features in the organisational behaviour of beneficiaries, which give rise to subtle class barriers among beneficiaries.

Also, the burden of loan repayment seems to intensify moving down the organisational hierarchy. For example, although managers are actively involved in the beneficiary selection process, managers did not refer once about their accountability to senior officers for any failure by beneficiaries to repay loan money. However, fieldworkers tended to exhibit nervousness in relation to ensuring repayments, hence the selection of good beneficiaries; beneficiaries appeared much more vocal, almost aggressive, about the importance of selecting good group members. As a beneficiary mentioned: 'after all, we have to repay the loan money – it is our burden, our responsibility'. Thus, as one moves down the organisational hierarchy the sense of responsibility (shaped and motivated by the goal of ensuring repayments) tends to intensify, giving rise to accountability relationships that flow upwards from beneficiaries to senior officers. The presence of such relationship patterns, where duties of accountability tend to deepen further down the organisational hierarchy, make it difficult for those members lower down to question the responsibilities or duties of accountability of members who are higher in the organisational hierarchy (as evidenced in the nervous proclamations of the fieldworkers and beneficiaries).

Moreover, the practice of beneficiary selection in ISDE, tends to reinforce gender based structures. For example, as the Chittagong branch manager mentions:

It is very important that we pay attention to the familial structure of the potential woman beneficiary during the selection process. We check everything first. The recruitment form asks for specific details of the husband's occupation. For example, if the potential beneficiary's husband has two wives, we do not grant membership....also, if the potential beneficiary has too many children, we try not to select such cases. - Chittagong branch manager

While ISDE policy documents draw specific attention to women as beneficiaries, in reality, these women beneficiaries are identified according to their husbands' professions. Thus, women's productive (and reproductive) roles are treated as secondary compared to those of their husbands. The above quote also reflects how the marital status of a woman is treated as an important factor in the beneficiary recruitment/selection phase. Most beneficiaries that the FA met in ISDE were married.

As the manager of the Chittagong branch mentions:

Generally, women are either dependent on their husbands or their fathers if they are unmarried...in ISDE we have beneficiaries who are unmarried too.... In such cases we require a signature on the recruitment form from their fathers and sometimes their mothers too...depending on who the beneficiary depends on....We don't grant membership without this.

From the above reference, it is evident that the assumption of the male as the primary breadwinner constructs the woman's position in the family as one of dependency, even though some women may be primary breadwinners in their respective families. As field observations suggest, many such cases exist. For example, in Maheshkhali the FA met a beneficiary whose husband had fled from the village, leaving her with three children to feed. This situation forced her into various labour intensive roles, such as growing paan and potatoes in the fields. Thus, although the recruitment forms may construe women's roles as those of dependency (the general understanding is that 'women do not have sufficient knowledge about the market, and could therefore misuse the loan money'^x), previously married women (separated, divorced or widowed) without primary breadwinning husbands are often selected as beneficiaries (as stressed proudly in policy documents). However, the point to note here is that like married women, separated/divorced/widowed women receive more preference in the selection process than single women (albeit for different reasons). While married women are preferred because of the supposed guarantee provided by primary breadwinning husbands, separated, divorced or widowed women are preferred because of their supposed non-dependent roles as primary breadwinners^{xi}. Selecting women from both these categories is therefore regarded as minimising risk in terms of collecting loan repayments. Therefore, rather than working towards dismantling the structural barriers women face, ISDE works around them.

5.1.2 Loan Collection

The underlying principle of microfinance as a development aim, in keeping with an NGO based model, is the notion of group participation (Fernando, 2006). While an underlying reason for fostering such a space is to promote and instil the notions of group liability among beneficiaries, a further reason is to encourage women to interact and engage in different types of discussion with each other and a member of staff, which can open doors to critical thinking and eventually empowerment. Following the theoretical underpinning of this model, ISDE stresses in policy documents that its microfinance operation focuses on 'organising poor women into groups' to help create space for 'collective action, self-reliance, unity and solidarity'. As further illustrated in the documents, at such meetings the participants have the opportunity apparently to 'discuss their problems and share information on their needs, tasks, rights and possible solutions', which helps promote 'social education'. However, loan collection/group session spaces suggest otherwise.

In ISDE group sessions are mainly conducted by the fieldworkers. Managers tend to be more involved in office work, preparing and maintaining accounts, but their roles also involve making monthly visits to the localities of beneficiaries. Such meetings usually begin with the fieldworkers collecting repayments (and/or saving deposits) and recording them in a ledger book. These payments (and/or deposits) are also recorded in individual log books for beneficiaries. The field observations suggested that in order to fast-track this process there appeared to be an agreement between fieldworkers and beneficiaries whereby the group leader acts as an intermediary to whom beneficiaries could drop off repayments and their individual log books (usually the day prior to the weekly collection day). Beneficiaries appeared to take pride in being able to say that their group meetings 'did not last very long':

We are very efficient as a group. Madam^{xii} comes, spends five minutes recording the payments and leaves...We deposit our payments with the group leader the night before collection day. We don't cause any problems...we have no bad beneficiaries in our group! We are very responsible. – Beneficiary, Maheshkhali.

As indicated in the above reference, the loan collection process, like the beneficiary selection process, is also shaped by the short-term goal of ensuring repayments. Beneficiaries endeavour constantly to conform to and maintain the image of being good, responsible beneficiaries. Since the key focus of the group meeting is dominated by ensuring the efficiency of the collection process, the importance of undertaking group discussions and interactions tend inevitably to be side-lined. As a woman fieldworker in Maheshkhali describes:

I have to visit at least three sites every day. Also, some of my sites are far apart from each other! Some days I walk from one location to another....but some days I have to catch a tom tom^{xiii}....but my salary here is only 3,000 taka^{xiv}...but to go from one locality to another, I have to pay 20 taka....it's not affordable for me....so I prefer walking....but it takes out all my energy....boro shaheb does not provide us with extra money for transport.

Reflecting on the socio-economic closeness between beneficiaries and fieldworkers, as can be understood from the above reference, although fieldworkers are higher in the organisational hierarchy than beneficiaries, they 'may not necessarily be in a better social position to foster change'^{xv}. Given that fieldwork is considered a 'lowly' job, people from the lower middle class or upper poor class, with minimal educational background, are usually hired for these positions. As the fieldworker in the above quote points out disgruntledly, her salary is only '3,000 taka'. Despite the lowly status of this position, fieldwork is a highly demanding job, with fieldworkers having to visit 'at least three sites' daily. As each site consists of several groups, the entire focus is on the efficiency of the loan collection process and not group discussions. Fieldworkers mention further that they have been advised to 'wait until evening at a particular site if necessary' to collect loans. In an informal group session with Maheshkhali fieldworkers and the manager, they referred to an event where they all had to stay overnight at the office and guard the repayments from that day. This reflects the interrelated roles of managers and fieldworkers. While managers are higher in the organisational hierarchy, and may have less obligation in terms of ensuring repayments (as discussed in Section 5.1.1), the obligation itself is strong enough to concern them, and to require them to act when necessary and work alongside fieldworkers. As the manager stresses, they do not receive recognition for any 'extra work'. This highlights how managers may have a similar discontent as fieldworkers, regarding the goal of ensuring repayments. After all, as the manager of the Chittagong branch stated, the role of a manager requires 'active participation in the microfinance programme'. The intertwinement of such organisational roles and relationships reflect the complexities of traditionally understood upward and downward accountability relationships. While managers are in a relatively superior position compared to those of the fieldworkers^{xvi} they can also become weighed down by the organisational goal of ensuring repayments.

Such complexities in accountability relationships can be observed among beneficiaries, as well. Thus, placing all women under one category is naïve, and consideration needs to be given to the conflict among women. As raised in Section 5.1.1 above, there can be hidden conflicts/differences between women belonging to the same microfinance group owing to differing social classes, also within family members belonging to the same microfinance group (e.g. between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law). For example, before the beginning of a PAR session, as the FA waited for more participants to arrive, she paid attention to conversations between the women; they (microfinance beneficiaries and one of the fieldworkers) were talking— mostly complaining — about their daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law. The following quote from the FA's journal help illustrate this:

Yesterday, my husband went to the bazaar and he bought many food items. He bought some fresh fish...so I gutted, cleaned and filleted the fish, and fried it to store it for later use. I wanted it to cool down, so I left it in the kitchen. But a cat came into the house and ate all the fish! Luckily my husband saw this happening... but imagine my mother-in-law coming to know of this without any context... She would have shouted at me – without any reason! So mothers-in-law should be understanding, too! But it is true – this generation's daughters-in-law are not very nice.

Thus, contrary to how 'women' as a category is often naively understood as a homogenous construct^{xvii}, such inherent differences and intersectionalities among women can give rise to multifaceted accountability relationships within the microfinance group itself.

5.2 Alternative Social Logic Spaces

The above section throws light on how microfinance practices in ISDE are predominantly confined within the dominant economic logic mould. However, as illustrated, while this gives rise to upward accountability relationships between different groups along the organisational hierarchy, these groups are not homogenous, and organisational roles and responsibilities are intertwined. Thus, within such upward accountability relationships, subtle signs exist of informal bonds and friendships among managers, fieldworkers and beneficiaries. Downward accountability, as a concept, is not promoted as an institutional practice in the ISDE microfinance context. However, given the nature of day-to-day dealings among the aforementioned members, which involve regular weekly field-visits to the localities of beneficiaries, the forming of such bonds is a natural phenomenon. This is evident in the quotes below from interviews with fieldworkers and beneficiaries:

Since they come to our place every week, they have become like family members to us. They know us quite well at a personal level. They are really nice. They have never misbehaved with us...they talk really nicely with us ...they are nice with each and every client. When people have found it difficult to repay the money...they were always very cooperative...they resolve issues calmly ... never becoming agitated. - Beneficiary

(Jokingly) Amra oderk doa kori ashirbadh kori jaate tomra income korte paro. (We pray for them, give them our blessings...so that they can earn income) Also, my income here is only 3,000 taka...if I want I could join BRAC and get 10,000 for similar role.... But I don't wish to leave them....they have become like a family. - Fieldworker.

As can be observed in the first quote above, almost all the beneficiaries during the field visits expressed close, friendly bonds with their managers and fieldworkers. Also, as apparent in the third quote, there seems to be a perception among beneficiaries that ISDE staff members do not behave like other 'shahebs'. For example, as a beneficiary described, 'fieldworkers in other organisations tend always to sit on chairs during loan collection and to speak with a raised voice'. This implies that bad behaviour is often expected from people higher in the social hierarchy. The fact that ISDE staff members do not conform to such norms is much appreciated by beneficiaries. As further mentioned by the Maheshkhali branch manager, given ISDE's small scale microfinance operation compared to other organisations in the 'competitive market', 'good behaviour' is one of the ways ISDE focuses on 'retaining clients'. Thus, while ISDE has an implicit economic focus, when it comes to behaving well with its beneficiaries, this creates, to some degree, social logic relationships along the organisational hierarchy (specifically between beneficiaries and lower-tier staff members, who have informal interactions with beneficiaries on a weekly basis). However, given the dominance of teachings

from the top informed by economic logic ideals, that instil the norms of a ‘good’ beneficiary, fieldworkers and managers tend to internalise unwittingly disassociated ways of forming relationships with beneficiaries. Despite the authority of such economic logic dictates, hence, the restricted nature of social logic spaces, bonds of friendship still form among managers, fieldworkers and beneficiaries. As described by the Chittagong branch manager, despite it not being a formal organisational practice, he sometimes (albeit on rare occasions) ‘had conversations with beneficiaries’ husbands in terms of the importance of avoiding domestic violence’. As he mentioned, it is ‘difficult for us to turn a blind eye completely to issues that beneficiaries may face’. Such informal accountability dynamics in organisational relationships, reflect the hidden conditions of possibility that could potentially be nurtured to encourage the creation of dialogic spaces within ISDE’s practice of microfinance.

However, as emphasised by top-tier officers (including managers), beneficiaries are uninterested in attending group sessions for the opportunity to learn and think critically in a respectful environment^{xviii}. Contrary to this understanding, beneficiaries interviewed were open to the idea of participating in such sessions. As commented by a beneficiary:

If we could access better teaching about life, it would be good for us...we like the idea of being taught. We tell our children about the importance of education... Of course we understand how important education is...They should encourage us...encourage us to learn from them...

While on a positive note, some beneficiaries expressed keenness to attend group discussion sessions, implicit in the quote above are the hidden power dynamics between ‘those who hand out loan[s] (ISDE) and ‘those who take loan[s] (beneficiaries), with the former in a relatively superior power position. Given the dominant, unidirectional relationship between fieldworkers and beneficiaries the idea of participating in discussions in group sessions, from the perspective of beneficiaries, appears to be perceived as a unidirectional learning environment where beneficiaries would be given one-sided teaching. This reflects how the deep-seated power dynamics between top-tier and lower-tier members, not just because of positional hierarchies, but also class hierarchies^{xix}, can hinder social logic ways of appreciating ‘learning’, as a construct. Given such deep-seated norms of hidden oppression, it would be naïve to evaluate the idea of ‘creating change’ as a short-term concept. Thus, a key step in terms of bringing about change would involve highlighting obstructive power hierarchies to various organisational members and their relative power positions within the organisational hierarchy. While this discussion reflects the inherent difficulty in creating change, the fact that beneficiaries expressed interest in attending discussion sessions could potentially be considered as a condition of possibility. This interest and enthusiasm enabled organising PAR sessions with beneficiaries.

5.2.1 Evaluating the Potential of Dialogic Accounting and Accountability through PAR

A combination of PAR methods, such as story-telling, with more subtle practices that enabled an interactive and critical learning environment, enabled the organisation of sessions where participants felt free to share, analyse, and enhance their knowledge of living conditions. Open-ended approaches, where participants had the opportunity to also make input to the overall structure of the sessions, helped create a dialogic leaning environment between the traditionally viewed researcher and research participants. This enabled deeper understanding of the structural barriers women face in the Maheshkhali context. Understanding such barriers helped structure sessions according to what participants could potentially relate or respond to. This

helped beneficiaries open-up much more than would have been possible in traditional one-on-one interviews. This is discussed below.

5.2.1.1 Critical Self-reflection as Essential Ingredients

Given that a core focus of this study is to explore how participation, as concept can be incorporated in accountability systems, it was important that critical attention was paid to the development of this construct in the PAR sessions. As discussed in Section 4, adopting group discussion as a pre-dominant methodological tool helped give a nuanced understanding of participation as a concept, through observing, reflecting and acting on interactions in the PAR group. Hence, giving creative direction to the sessions was necessary, which was accomplished via usage of various methods discussed in Section 4. Focusing on the use of multifarious methods (as opposed to using the same methods repetitively) helped make the sessions entertaining and hence helped engage participants in a wide-range of discussions. As a beneficiary comments:

I look forward to attending these sessions....no one ever encourages us to think creatively.... I didn't think I was capable of writing what I wrote.

It was important to take account that participants were not used to attending such sessions. Therefore, rather than 'throwing participants in the deep end', the FA endeavoured to ease them into these sessions by slowly pushing their creative boundaries in each session. For example, for the first few sessions video-showing and story-telling were used as tools to facilitate group discussion. This served three purposes: first, participants were helped to feel comfortable, as the onus was on the FA, rather than on them, to instigate the sessions; secondly, watching and listening respectively to thought-provoking videos and stories helped participants to reflect on alternative perspectives; thirdly, the use of such creatively inspired methods in the initial sessions, followed by some stimulating group discussion, helped the FA communicate to participants that she envisaged the sessions as being participatory. After a few initial sessions, where the participants felt constantly engaged, self-reflection and participation came a little more naturally to them. These few sessions gave the participants and FA the opportunity to form bonds of friendships (a much needed step for enhancing 'downward accountability'). Given that the beneficiary-participants were from different microfinance groups and localities, hence, did not know each other in most cases, these initial sessions also gave participants opportunities to become acquainted – an important step in ensuring that participants felt comfortable with each other in the sessions that followed. Owing to a comfortable, collaborative and, most importantly, a participatory environment, it was possible to continue with further participatory group exercises for later sessions, and to experiment also with even more innovative methods. Once participants became less inhibited and more confident, they began to suggest the kind of exercises they wished to participate in. For example, once participants wrote stories through an instigator, in the form of a picture description exercise, they felt more confident to participate in such sessions. After this picture description exercise, to the FA's 'pleasant surprise', as noted in her journal, a few beneficiaries of their own volition suggested that they wished to write about their life experiences. Through such exercises, participants felt 'enlightened and empowered^{xx}'. This helped further to create an environment where participants could reflect on complex constructs, such as empowerment, accountability and the day-to-day structural barriers women face in the rural context – a much needed step for helping beneficiaries contemplate the duties of accountability of a microfinance organisation towards them.

As can be understood, to make ‘reflection’ part of the PAR sessions, both within and outside the threshold of the sessions, was a crucial way of making the sessions ‘dialogic’. The FA designed only a skeletal framework for each session to avoid dictatorial implementation of the sessions. This involved intense reflection on various factors, such as the teaching and learning from each session, role as the facilitator in the sessions, the interactions between different participants, depending on their organisational or societal hierarchy, and structural barriers for women in the rural context. The FA maintained a commitment to writing journals, which contained vivid narratives not only of detail from sessions, but also reflective analysis on the hidden conditions in her own and participants’ lives. The following note from her journal helps demonstrate this:

Day 1 in Maheshkhali....it seems that people here in Maheshkhali are not used to seeing people from the city...As we started walking, curious people began following us....As we reached the courtyard where the meeting was to be held, the place became crowded by a LOT of people (mostly women)....A few even took out their cell-phones and began taking photos! I was a bit flustered by all the attention.

Given the nature of attention, this helped reflect on the deep-seated nature of class barriers ingrained in the social fabric, connecting rural and urban Bangladesh. Such observations, helped appreciate how showing respect for the norms and cultures of the beneficiaries, and acting with humility towards them were of the utmost importance in order to succeed in forming bonds of close friendships. The FA endeavoured to cultivate humility, not only in terms of how she appeared physically, but also in terms of how she spoke with and addressed the participants.

It was important to retain the reflective hat inside the physical realms of the sessions. In order to encourage multifaceted discussions and debates, these reflections within the physical vicinity of the sessions took more on-the-spot, intuitive forms. This involved active listening and giving direction to multifarious conversations in the sessions, all the while aiming to keep the sessions participatory and critical. Reflective actions, took such forms as: remaining silent and allowing conversations to unfold, but guiding conversations by inviting reflection on alternatives and the structural barriers faced by women in the Maheshkhali context; asking thought-provoking questions; paying attention to and picking up on tailing-off conversations; observing group dynamics; and facilitating a space where more marginalised participants (e.g. from poorer backgrounds, or younger participants) or introverted personalities could feel encouraged to share their thoughts and ideas. During a session which focused on the advantages and disadvantages of microfinance as a development aim, the participants suggested that a reason they preferred ISDE above other microfinance organisations was because it did not require ‘beneficiary identity photo’ for its registration form. As one of the participants mentioned: ‘Islam does not allow taking photos. We want to be good women. Taking photos is a sin’. Given FA’s background as a Muslim, and recognising the absurdity of the statement, her counter statement (hence reflective action) was:

But if you are planning to go for Hajj sometime in the future, you will need photos for a passport and the Hajj registration form..... So how is taking photos an act of sin? Also, Quran was revealed at a time when cameras did not exist...there isn’t any specific verse in Quran saying you cannot take photos....So who made this rule in Maheshkhali? I, too, am a Muslim....I take photos all the time...Does that make me a bad woman?

Given the importance of holy pilgrimage (Hajj) as one of the five pillars of Islam, mentioning the above in response to participants' discussions helped evoke strong emotions that were interwoven with critical thinking by some participants:

.... Yes... I haven't thought of it this way. The Mosque clerics have so much power here.... They are the ones who dictate what is right...what is wrong....we believe them...because they are people with authority and power.... Participant

The quote above highlights how such reflective actions helped beneficiaries to question the norms of the hidden oppression within the Maheshkhali context. The participants questioned the authority of the Mosque clerics, who use religion as a tool to justify repressive practices in the rural context. Therefore, these 'reflective actions', both within and outside the sessions, enabled critical, insightful and collaborative dialogue between the facilitator and the research participants, and also among participants themselves, thus creating a dialogic, empowering environment during the sessions. It also enabled contemplation more generally on accountability as a construct, and how it needs to incorporate broader perspectives. As highlighted by a beneficiary in the final PAR session, who reflected on the accountability duties of ISDE:

We have heard many different stories here... we heard Raju and Mithus stories....we heard feroza and rohima's stories, we heard naureen's story...we even got to hear our own personal life stories. I felt empowered in the process.... I saw other women experience empowerment...we don't have much to do here in the village...women in village mostly sit at home and cook and eat.... Women don't have much opportunity in terms of work. Undertaking the different participatory exercises was extremely empowering.... I felt enlightenedI want to keep this enlightenment... I want to feel my mind at work all the time, just as I felt during the sessions.... This could be possible with the ISDE's help....there are not many options here for women.... ISDE could start tailoring training here.... This would be a successful endeavour here in Maheshkhali. ISDE could start awareness-raising training and other schools for teenage girls.... We also need more funding for investing in businesses, such as paan and salt cultivation.. We loved the way you conducted the sessions... the way you interacted with all of us... the way you became friends with us... we loved the way you talked... I feel very close to you and will probably never forget your hospitable nature. - Beneficiary 2

In marked contrast to the anxious obsession with the goal of returning loan money, which hinders beneficiaries from comprehending the ISDE's accountability duties to them, the quote above helps capture the richness of thought with which beneficiaries can in fact begin to reflect on accountability, as a construct, if given the opportunity. The beneficiary in the quote above, takes a personal approach to empowerment by reflecting on her own journey of self-development through the PAR sessions, and how ISDE could imitate these processes in its own accountability practices. She also expands on how ISDE could develop the 'economic-logic' side of its microfinance programme by creating more opportunities for women, such as through the provision of basic tailoring training. These deep reflections, which include the structural barriers to and practical needs of women, exemplify the transformative potential of the PAR methods/space used/created in the context of this case-study. As the executive director mentions:

I am pleasantly surprised at what you were able to achieve through these sessions.... I did not know that our beneficiaries were capable of so much.... They have such hidden talents! The stories they wrote are so wonderful, so deep in meaning. All the methods you used are so creative. We should think more seriously about incorporating such methods in our microfinance programme.... or in other projects.

While top-tier officers had alluded to the unwillingness of beneficiaries to attend participatory group sessions, the above emotional response (to results from the PAR sessions) demonstrates how such staunch opinions could slowly be transformed through the creation of dialogic spaces. Such positive responses, reactions, and reflections from beneficiaries and members of staff help put in context how oppressive social and organisational realities could be transformed through the creation of dynamic, collaborative, dialogic spaces.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on dialogic accounting theory and practice, and thereby helps advance this relatively new branch in SEA. Given the relatively short history of dialogic accounting, much work remains to be done both theoretically and empirically (Brown, 2009). Much prior work has focused on the developed country context, with insufficient attention given to developing countries. This study contributes to dialogic accounting by exploring it in a developing country context, considering how downward accounting and accountability systems could be developed within microfinance NGOs, paying crucial attention to power relations not just between groups within the organisational hierarchy, but also individuals within the groups. This study illustrates how the use of PAR tools helped flesh out and hence demonstrate to various organisational members, that accounting is irrevocably enmeshed within our histories, religious beliefs, and gendered cultural norms – a crucial step forward to bringing about transformations of social ideals and within organisational systems. The use of dialogically informed feminist, post-structural PAR methods helped exhibit to participants (including the researcher) that financially unburdening marginalised groups is insufficient for emancipation, and how the limits of conventional accounting practices nurtures social norms that neglect basic rights for women. This led to deep reflections on the need for breaking accounting's silence in these spaces, by continuously questioning the models being promoted, and their underlying assumptions regarding development. This helped reveal how various members within ISDE are active participants in the creation of their social worlds, capable of agency and self-change, albeit conditioned within structural constraints. Thus, the PAR-dialogic accountability nexus presented in this study helped demonstrate how existing situations could be problematised and re-narrated, specifically within a developing country context, where influential hegemonies (such as class structures) shape social relationships. The empirical insights have thus helped deepen the conceptualisation of social change processes within dialogic accounting.

As a researcher, our own positions, perspectives and unique experiences within the PAR site may have encouraged the development of one-sided opinions and conclusions, which is contrary to the ethos of dialogic theory. Critical and interpretive researchers argue that all research is subjective and biased to some extent (for example, in the choice of topics, methodologies and presentations) and that it is better to discuss this openly rather than pretend that research is always completely neutral. Given the critical nature of the researcher's active engagement within the research site, PAR academics emphasise the importance of addressing how one's bias is dealt with within the research (Herr and Anderson, 2005). Kindon *et al.* (2007) suggest that in order to do this, PAR researchers need to build critical self-reflexivity to the best of their abilities, as part of the research process. As shown in this study, we have addressed this issue by actively maintaining journals, field notes, and engaging in validation meetings in which ongoing findings are discussed and debated with members of our case-study site (Herr and Anderson, 2005).

While this study has investigated the potential of dialogic accountability engagements between and within various internal organisational members, future researchers could extend this to include various external members, such as the government and donor organisations. Also, future researchers could further investigate the synergies between SEA, PAR, and gender and development studies, by specifically honing down on the differing roles and social constraints on women, and investigating in depth the various intersectionalities in their lives, and reflecting on how such complexities could potentially be incorporated in existing accounting and accountability systems of NGOs and microfinance organisations. Additionally, the potential challenges of critical dialogic accounting could be further explored, discussed, and addressed among researchers and practitioners from various disciplines.

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ⁱ A major microfinance innovation is the notion of group lending, based on groups of five to six women borrowers (usually from the same locality) (Jacobs *et al.*, 2012). While loans are made to individuals, each group member is ultimately responsible for the loan repayment process by the group (ibid). The group meets weekly at one of the group member's houses with a bank officer. A group-leader is appointed who assumes the role of ensuring that everyone repays the money on time.

ⁱⁱ This was necessary because the FA was involved as a full-time Assistant Lecturer at Victoria University of Wellington, while studying her PhD part-time.

ⁱⁱⁱ ISDE Bangladesh Brief Information Profile, p. 4.

^{iv} This is discussed briefly in Section 4.1.3.

^v NZ\$0.20 to NZ\$0.80 approximately.

^{vi} The savings provision helps minimise the risk of default - in case a beneficiary fails to repay the loan, they have the option of repaying with the savings they have made. In some other microfinance organisations this threshold is higher than 10 to 50 taka.

^{vii} Usually keeping track of the business habits of beneficiaries' husbands.

^{viii} Flowing upwards from fieldworkers to senior officers.

^{ix} As in 'sir' - in Bangladesh, people higher in the organisational hierarchy are referred to as sir or madam.

^x Chittagong branch manager

^{xi} While married women are selected because of the assurance that derives from the relative permanency of their situations (in their respective localities), the selection of previously married women comes with the same benefit, as it is highly unlikely these women will remarry and hence move to different locations. In the Bangladeshi rural context it is considered socially unacceptable for separated, divorced or widowed women to remarry (although supported by Islamic scripts).

^{xii} Referring to the fieldworker in a respectful manner, given her seniority in the organisational hierarchy from the vantage point of the beneficiaries.

^{xiii} Maheshkhali transport - auto rickshaws.

^{xiv} Approximately NZ\$50 per month.

^{xv} Note from FA's journal.

^{xvi} Given that their roles (as I note in my journal) 'do not involve running so much from one site to another' and also, given that such roles are considered 'lowly' in the Bangladeshi context.

^{xvii} As evidenced in Section 5.1.1 above (as well), in the way ISDE beneficiary selection process focuses on forming 'homogenous' groups.

^{xviii} Apparently, beneficiaries are more interested in earning income for their day-to-day living, than attending group sessions, which according to them is a 'waste of precious time', which they could put towards gathering income.

^{xix} Beneficiaries belong to much poorer sections of society. Whereas, top-tier members, such as board members, come from illustrious educational backgrounds and belong usually to upper middle class.

^{xx} Quote from 8th PAR session transcript (picture description exercise).